



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

# Refugee Children in U.S. Schools: *A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel*



## Tool 3: Refugee Child Welfare: Guidance for Schools

## Refugee Child Welfare: Guidance for Schools

Teachers and other school staff are on the front lines of working with refugee children and their families, and at times deal with child welfare and family issues. In all states, teachers and school staff are “mandated reporters,” meaning they are required to report suspected [child maltreatment](#) (i.e. physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect) to child welfare authorities. Although this mandated reporter responsibility should make children safer, it may also make refugee families fearful of teachers.



Furthermore, some apparent signs of neglect or abuse may be the result of traditional cultural practices, learned behaviors from the refugee experience, or the need for education about U.S. practices. BRYCS created this resource to help teachers distinguish resettlement challenges and cultural differences from child maltreatment, and to consider resources for refugee families facing such challenges.

Broadly speaking, child welfare authorities are charged with protecting and promoting the “best interests of the child.” More specifically, this concept includes the safety, permanence, and well-being of children:

- **Safety:** Is the child safe from harm in his or her current home?
- **Permanence:** Does the child have a home and long-term, meaningful connections to caregivers?
- **Well-being:** Are the child’s physical, educational, social and emotional needs taken care of?

The local government child welfare agency responsible for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect is typically called child protective service (CPS). Definitions of child abuse and neglect are established locally and vary from state to state. As a mandated reporter, you should familiarize yourselves with your state’s laws. A good way to do this is to invite a CPS social worker to your school to give a presentation at a faculty meeting.

Under federal law, child abuse and neglect encompasses the following:<sup>1</sup>

- **Physical Abuse:** Physical acts by parents or caregivers that cause, or could have caused, physical injury to the child.
- **Neglect:** Failure of parents or other caregiver, for reasons not solely due to poverty, to provide the child with needed, age-appropriate care, including food, clothing, shelter, protection from harm, supervision appropriate to the child’s development, hygiene, education, and medical care.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Sexual activity by a parent or other caregiver, with a child, including but not limited to any kind of sexual contact through persuasion, physical force, or other coercive means; exploitation through sexual activity that is allowed, encouraged, or coerced; and child prostitution or pornography.
- **Emotional Maltreatment:** Parental or other caregiver acts or omissions, such as rejecting, terrorizing, berating, ignoring, or isolating a child, that cause or are likely to cause the child serious impairment of his or her physical, social, mental, or emotional capacities.

Refugee child welfare is a delicate and complicated issue in which educators should consider both children’s well-being and cultural differences. This tool provides some issues to consider when evaluating the welfare of refugee children. Ultimately teachers and school staff should follow state and local laws and policies, as well as established school procedures.

## Potential Areas of Concern

While refugee families may experience the same types of child welfare issues as American-born families or those who have lived in the U.S. for a significant period of time, refugee parents are more likely to face child-rearing issues in areas such as the following.

- **Lack of knowledge about typical U.S. parenting norms and behaviors:** Parenting behaviors may vary by culture, geographic region, religion, educational level, socio-economic status, etc. Refugee families may have different expectations of discipline methods, supervision, the amount of work children do around the home, and more.
- **Limited community supports and limited knowledge of local resources:** Refugee families may not know where to turn when they are in need, particularly if they lack family or friends who have been in the U.S. for a significant period of time. They may need help with finding a job or English language classes, locating social service resources, child care, transportation, and more.
- **Balancing resettlement challenges with parenting responsibilities:** Resettlement in a new country involves an overwhelming barrage of new information and experiences, particularly for refugees from less developed countries. Refugee parents may struggle with balancing their work schedules with children's school schedules, learning enough English to interact with school staff, coping with sadness due to family members who are missing or left behind, changing circumstances, traumatic memories, and more.
- **Distant or renewed family relationships:** Some refugees reunify with family members who have already been in the U.S. for some time. It is not uncommon for children to be reunited with parents or siblings whom they have not seen in years. Such children may have a greater sense of independence than their family members expect, and parents may infantilize children by treating them as if they are still the age at which the family last lived together; children may miss the caregivers they've left behind, and new step-parents or half-siblings may have trouble adjusting to one another.
- **Intergenerational tension:** Refugee children who are exposed to English language and U.S. cultural behaviors in the classroom often acculturate faster than their parents, which can lead to a reversal in family roles. Due to their more rapid acquisition of language and culture, refugee children and youth may develop more power and authority than their parents, which can upset the dynamics of the family.

All of the factors listed above can affect the ability of refugee parents to care for their children's needs. School social workers may be an important resource for helping refugee families with some of these issues.



## Intervention

Knowing when to intervene can be difficult. If you suspect a child is being abused and/or neglected you must intervene. As a mandated reporter you are legally required to call your local child protective services office. Making a phone call does not necessarily mean that the child will be removed from his or her family. Child protective services social workers are trained to investigate the entire situation and will not make snap decisions or judgments but will base their decisions on whether or not the child can be safe if he or she remains in the home. Most CPS social workers come into the home with the perspective of keeping the family together if the child's safety can be assured, and working with the family to promote child well-being.

School personnel are likely to encounter refugee students who are not in immediate danger but in a fragile situation related to the areas of potential concern outlined above. Schools should particularly keep an eye out for refugee students who:

- Lack stable housing and move by themselves from one relative or friend's home to another.
- Have parents or caregivers who are unable or unwilling to care for them.
- Have distant or weak relationships with their caregivers.

In response to concerns such as those listed above, school personnel may consider taking the following steps:

- Learn about other strategies for working with refugee families, such as those described in this [previous BRYCS article](#).
- Consult with school social workers or a cultural liaison in your school district.
- Reach out to local child welfare or community agencies to access in-home family support services. Connecting and building relationships with your local child welfare agency is vital to understanding their process and knowing what programs and services they offer. For example, many child welfare agencies provide short-term intensive family preservation programs or longer-term support services for families.
- Call BRYCS at (888) 572-6500. BRYCS social workers are available to discuss refugee specific situations that school staff may encounter.

## Prevention

Teachers and other school staff can take steps to strengthen refugee families and help prevent some of the risks described above.

- Develop a refugee task force or coalition to address specific concerns for newcomer families.
- Invite someone with child welfare expertise or local family strengthening initiatives to discuss community services and [supports](#) for refugee families.
- Invite staff from refugee resettlement and/or ethnic community-based organizations to discuss local resources and services for newcomer families.
- [Involve refugee parents in their children's education](#) as much as possible. For example, the [Dallas](#) schools offer refugee parent support services and refugee parenting classes as well as counseling for students and families as needed. Other models exist for facilitating this engagement, such as [community schools](#) and full-service schools. For instance, the [Highline Public Schools](#) in Washington partner with four community-based organizations, which help engage refugee families.
- Check out the accompanying List of Highlighted Resources on [Addressing Refugee Child Welfare Concerns in the Schools](#).

Teachers and other school staff play an important role in the lives of refugee students and their families. By knowing basic information about child welfare and how school districts can help support refugee families, teachers and school staff can help to promote the safety, permanence, and well-being of refugee students.

---

<sup>1</sup>Child Welfare League of America: <http://www.cwla.org/programs/childprotection/childprotectionfaq.htm#injuries>